

# The Wild Bird Trade

There is no straightforward way of ascertaining whether a bird in a pet shop has been bred in captivity or taken from the wild. By asking the manager, you are not guaranteed correct information - it may be that he/she does not know the full history.

Imported wild-caught birds are typically cheaper to purchase than their captive-bred counterparts, which is why they are still traded in such large numbers. The EU is the world's largest importer of wild-caught parrots, with the legal trade in non-threatened species acting as a smokescreen for trade in endangered species. The European Union imports around one million wild caught birds each year.

People who buy these birds might be unaware that they have contributed to a trade that involves cruelty and high mortality and also threatens the survival of many species. One bird species in five is facing possible extinction, trade being a significant threat. The parrot family has more globally threatened species than any other family of birds. The CITES "Red List" contains more than one hundred species of parrots, and lists capture for the pet trade as a major threat for most of them.

The Environmental Investigation Agency - which has conducted ground-breaking research into the area - estimates that, for every bird who reaches a petshop three others will have died during capture, confinement and transportation.



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Regulations and laws designed to control the trade are poorly applied in both exporting and importing countries. This is because proper monitoring would cost governments more than would be generated in revenue. Dealers know this and rely on lack of enforcement to bend and break the rules. Often the legal trade is used as cover to smuggle endangered species.

## Trapping

Bird trapping methods vary from country to country and depend upon the size of the target. Small birds are often trapped in bulk, whereas larger species may be trapped individually. Much cruelty is involved in trapping, partly because any who die can usually be replaced quickly and cheaply. Most methods are indiscriminate with untargeted species regularly caught.

Wild-caught finches mostly originate from India and Africa and are either trapped in flight by nets or in baited trap-cages. In unskilled hands the use of nets may result in high casualties. In some cases, birds are left for hours or even days struggling in the nets, sometimes dying of dehydration. Some bird trappers set up more nets than they can visit regularly. This can result in heavy losses caused by physical injury or predation.

Less discriminatory and more hazardous to trapped individuals is 'bird-lime', an adhesive substance applied to bushes or trees to ensnare. Birds caught this way lose many feathers and the sticky substance finds its way onto much of the remaining plumage.

After trapping, birds are transferred into bags, baskets, small boxes or crates, in which they are moved to the trapper's home. They can then spend days or weeks being passed between dealers.

Heavy mortality occurs between capture and export, with estimates as high as 50%.



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### Final destination

Birds have been reported to spend up to eight months at the holding premises of exporters prior to transport by air to their final destination. Studies of conditions at holding grounds have found overcrowding and an absence of food, water or light. Symptoms of distress include feather-plucking, dirty plumage, wounds and exhaustion.

Filthy conditions, overcrowding, excessive temperatures and trauma increase disease susceptibility.

Those who die en route to the consumer are spared the artificial, caged existence that awaits the survivors. In the wild, many species of parrot travel and feed in flocks. This brings to each individual not only a degree of safety and security, but also important social interaction and development skills. In captivity, birds are frequently kept alone. In some cases isolation can last for decades.

Britain does not allow an international pet trade in our own wild birds and yet our local pet shops are allowed to sell species imported from other continents. Surely, exotics birds should be granted the same protection we provide for our native species? In fact, more than 200 non-governmental organisations called, in June 2006, for a 'permanent ban on the importation of wild-caught birds into the European Union, because the trade imperils species, causes needless suffering, and subjects humans to risks of deadly disease'. The groups included the Born Free Foundation, the RSPCA and the World Parrot Trust. Animal Aid is backing the initiative.